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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews some of the literature on middle grades teacher preparation focusing on the following topics: (1) characteristics and needs of early adolescents (aged 10-14); (2) the kinds of schools and programs suited to early adolescents; and (3) characteristics of a teacher education curriculum that would adequately prepare teachers for these schools and programs. Early adolescent learners have special personal, social, and educational needs that, according to the literature, can be met more appropriately in a middle school (grades 6-8) than in an elementary or junior high school. Studies have recommended that middle schools be staffed by teachers who are expert at teaching early adolescents and have the appropriate education and training. According to many studies, teacher education must focus on the characteristics and needs of early adolescents and include content and methodology that are directly related to middle school programs. Recent studies underscore the need for both school-level professionals and teacher educators to involve themselves in restructuring teacher preparation for the middle grades and for greater cooperation between State Departments of Education and teacher training institutions to ensure adequate preparation and appropriate certification of middle school teachers. (LL)

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PREPARATION OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS TEACHERS

ERIC Digest 90-1

by

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON TEACHER EDUCATION

Preparation of Middle Schools Teachers

Anne Marie Harnett

Introduction

Specialists in human development, including educators, agree that early adolescence is more than a transition from childhood to adolescence and that it may well be as critical a period as the first two years of life. Early adolescents, ranging in age from 10 to 14, have special personal, social, and educational needs that can be met more appropriately in a middle school (grades 6-8) than in the elementary (K-8) or junior high (7-9) arrangement. It is generally agreed that neither the child-centered atmosphere of the elementary school nor the subject-centered curriculum of the high school or junior high school appropriately meets the early adolescent's social or learning needs.

During the 1960s and 1970s the research on middle-level schools and the specialized teacher preparation they require led many states to recognize the need for specialized training. In 1978, 15 states had special requirements for teaching in the middle grades, and 13 others were proposing legislation to require specialized preparation for these grades (Gillan, 1978). At present, however, only 14 states require specific credentials for teaching in the middle grades (Goddard, 1990). Despite the need for middle-level teacher preparation, the literature on this subject since 1980 is sparse. This situation may be changing because of the publicity given to the topic by recent reports from such organizations as the Carnegie Corporation and the National Middle Schools Association. The Carnegie report (1989) recommended that middle schools be staffed with teachers who are expert at teaching early adolescents and who have the education and training necessary for the assignment.

Early Adolescence

Early adolescence, sometimes called transescence, was described by Donald H. Eichorn as the "stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence" (1966, pp. 3-4). There is some agreement in the literature that five characteristics and needs set this learner (the transescent) apart from other children:

- The principal element of early adolescent development is unpredictable and highly variable physical change.
- A period of expansive brain growth occurs between ages 10-12 and a plateau period is reached between ages 12-14.
- The influence of parents, teachers, and other adults grows less important, giving way to the persuasive impact of peers.
- The need to develop values and to accept and like themselves.
- The need to learn to understand adults and the adult world, and to develop meaningful relationships with adults.

Clearly, schools and teachers capable of addressing such specialized needs are required. Two leaders in the middle school movement, William Alexander and Paul George (1981), argue that middle schools should be characterized by six elements:

- School guidance systems in which each student has a counselor who knows him/her well and with whom the student can consult on academic, social, and personal matters.
- A transitional curriculum which provides for careful articulation and coordination of learning experiences.
- Daily schedules organized into blocks of instructional time to allow for interdisciplinary instruction and appropriate learning experiences.
- Use of a variety of instructional strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective with early adolescents (such as cooperative learning, interdisciplinary instruction, team teaching).
- A wide range of exploratory courses designed to develop student interests, and an emphasis on intramural athletics which encourages participation by all students.
- A core of learning experiences appropriate to early adolescents focused on learning skills that students will need for future study.

The grades 6-8 middle school arrangement has been found to be more likely to incorporate these six elements than programs that include grade 6 in the elementary school and grades 7 and 8 in a junior high school. According to Alexander (1987), middle schools provide better transition to high school, offer broader and more flexible programs, and focus on early adolescent needs. An Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) study came to the same conclusion (Cawelti, 1988). The same study however pointed out that simply placing grades 5-8 or 6-8 together does not guarantee that the special needs of these students will be met. For the middle school to be different from the traditional junior high school, its curriculum and organization must be geared to serve students in the 10-14 age range.

If teachers are expected to be successful in middle schools, it follows that some of their training must focus on the characteristics of middle school programs. Yet, according to a recent study, 61 percent of the 394 schools surveyed had less than 25 percent of faculty with special preparation in middle grades education, and only 9 percent had more than 75 percent of their faculty with middle-level preparation. (Alexander & McEwin, 1989).

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Middle-level Teacher Education

Although a knowledge base specific to middle-level teacher education has not been developed to a degree where definite conclusions can be drawn, the direction such teacher education would be advised to take can be discerned from a review of contemporary literature.

It is advisable to include in the teacher education program the following elements:

- Course work and field experiences that are carefully articulated to eliminate the real or implied dichotomy between theory and practice, (e.g. using methods in preservice courses that have been successful in middle schools, such as cooperative learning techniques).
- Cooperating teachers chosen for their effective teaching behaviors and positive attitudes toward early adolescents, and who will help student teachers develop positive attitudes toward teaching itself and toward early adolescent learners.
- Courses and experiences that will provide candidates with an understanding of motivation in early adolescents and enable the candidates to model good motivation techniques and convey success expectations.
- Emphasis on the importance of productive time rather than the usual "time on task" and practical demonstration of the connection between productive use of time and student achievement.
- A curriculum that will provide candidates with an understanding of good teaching, especially with reference to appropriate teaching practices for middle schools, and the opportunity to examine the preferred elements of middle school organization and curriculum (specialized guidance programs, transitional curricula, block scheduling, interdisciplinary teaching, exploratory courses, and a core of studies designed to prepare young students for future learning).
- Course work and field experiences that show the relationship between teacher behavior and student achievement.
- Opportunity for prospective middle-level teachers to learn how to direct parent involvement in the schools and to plan and conduct parent-teacher conferences.

A recent survey (Sparapani, Abel, Edwards, & Herbster, 1991) of junior high and middle school teachers in four states and four socioeconomic categories led to conclusions similar to those listed above about the content of middle-level teacher education programs. The data from this study indicated that teachers may have knowledge of early adolescent development and of appropriate instructional strategies, but that some teachers may not fully understand how to use what they know. This study underscores the need for both school-level professionals and teacher educators to involve themselves in restructuring teacher preparation for the middle grades. The literature also indicates that cooperation is needed between State Departments of Education and teacher training institutions to ensure adequate preparation and appropriate certification of middle school teachers.

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